



### Thesis Statement Guidelines

Everything you write should develop around a clear central thesis. Your thesis is the backbone of your paper: the main point, the central idea. In fact, if you ask yourself, “What is the main point of this paper?” your answer should resemble your essay’s thesis statement. The thesis statement focuses your central *ideas* into one or two sentences.

Developing a well-crafted thesis statement and revising that statement as you write will help you discover what your essay is really about, what you really want to say. The suggested guidelines below show how to evaluate and refine your thesis statements, and thus how to best showcase your ideas.

#### è WHERE IS YOUR THESIS STATEMENT?

You should provide a thesis early in your essay – paragraph #1, or in longer essays #2 – in order to establish your position and give your reader a sense of direction. Avoid burying a great thesis statement in the middle of a paragraph or late in the paper.

#### è IS YOUR THESIS STATEMENT UNIFIED?

Choose one single focus for development. Don’t split your energy between two bulky topics.

	<u>Original Thesis</u>	<u>Revised Thesis</u>
	Queen Victoria set the tone of the British Empire, and she allowed powerful prime ministers to take political control of Britain.	Victoria set the tone for later monarchs by ruling through a series of prime ministers.
	The United Nations Organization has major weaknesses and cannot prevent a major war.	The organization of the UN makes it incapable of preventing a war between major powers.

	Printing has had a long and complex history during which it has brought about social and cultural reforms.	The development of printing sparked a series of social and cultural reforms.
	Mutual funds have grown rapidly in this country and offer advantages for the smaller investor.	Mutual funds have grown rapidly in this country because they offer advantages for the small investor.

**Check Your Thesis:** Are there two large statements connected loosely by a coordinate conjunction (and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet)? Would a subordinate conjunction help (through, although, because, since) to signal a relationship between the two sentences, or do the two imply a fuzzy unfocused thesis? If so, settle on ONE focus and proceed with further development.

#### è IS YOUR THESIS STATEMENT RESTRICTED?

- 1.) Your thesis statement should provide a restricted or limited focus for your essay. Narrow the field of your discussion to a specific line of reasoning/argumentation within a broad topic area.
- 2.) Your thesis should be limited to what can be accomplished in the specified number of pages. Shape your topic so that you can get straight to the “meat” of it – don’t settle for three pages of merely skimming the surface.
- 3.) The opposite of a focused, narrow, crisp thesis is a broad, sprawling, superficial thesis. Compare this original thesis with three possible revisions:

**Original:** There are serious objections to today’s horror movies.

**Revisions:** Because modern cinematic techniques have allowed filmmakers to get more graphic, horror flicks have desensitized young American viewers to violence.

The pornographic violence in “bloodbath” slasher movies degrades both men and women.

Today’s slasher movies fail to deliver the emotional catharsis that 1930s horror films did.

#### è IS YOUR THESIS STATEMENT CLEAR?

- 1.) Avoid vague words such as “interesting,” “negative,” “exciting,” “unusual,” and “difficult.” Avoid abstract words such as “society.” These words tell the reader next to nothing.
- 2.) Unless you are writing a technical report, avoid technical language. Always avoid jargon.
- 3.) Check to see if you need to define your terms (“socialism,” “conventional,” “commercialism,” “society”), and then decide the most suitable place to do so.

4.) Check and double check the cause and effect relationships you set up, and make sure all potential confusion is eliminated.

**Original:** Although the timber wolf is a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated. If it's so timid and gentle, why is it being exterminated?

**Revised:** Although the timber wolf is actually a timid and gentle animal, it is being systematically exterminated because people wrongfully believe it to be a fierce and cold-blooded killer.

### è IS YOUR THESIS STATEMENT ANALYTIC?

The thesis statement should do more than merely announce the topic; it must reveal what position you will take in relation to that topic, how you plan to analyze/evaluate the subject or the issue. In short, instead of merely stating a general fact or resorting to simplistic pro/con statements, *you must decide what it is you have to say*.

1.) Avoid merely announcing the topic; your original and specific "angle" should be clear.

**Original:** In this paper, I will discuss the relationship between fairy tales and early childhood.

**Revised:** Not just empty stories for kids, fairy tales shed light on the psychology of young children.

2.) Avoid making universal or pro/con judgments that oversimplify complex issues.

**Original:** We must save the whales.

**Revised:** Because our planet's health may depend upon biological diversity, we should save the whales.

3.) When you make a (subjective) judgment call, specify and justify your reasoning.

**Original:** Socialism is the best form of government for Kenya.

**Revised:** If the government takes over industry in Kenya, the industry will become more efficient.

4.) Avoid merely reporting a fact. Go further with your ideas – say more.

**Original:** Hoover's administration was rocked by scandal.

**Revised:** The many scandals of Hoover's administration revealed basic problems with the Republican Party's nominating process.

5.) Note that arriving at an analytical thesis doesn't happen magically. Continue to revise your essay and ideas will develop.

a. Geoffrey Chaucer's The Miller's Tale is a bawdy story of adultery and revenge.

b. Character in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Miller's Tale subvert certain audience expectations.

c. In Geoffrey Chaucer's The Miller's Tale, the sexual behaviors of such characters as Alison, Nicholas, and Absolon subvert audience expectations raised by the courtly love tradition in The Knight's Tale.

### è IS YOUR THESIS STATEMENT ORIGINAL AND ENERGETIC?

1.) AVOID generic arguments and formula statements. They work well to get a rough draft started, but will easily bore a reader. Keep revising until the thesis reflects your real ideas.

Compare the following:

**Original:** There are advantages and disadvantages to using statistics.

**Revisions:** Careful manipulation of data allows a researcher to use statistics to support any claim she desires.

In order to ensure accurate reporting, journalists must understand the real significance of the statistics they report.

Because advertisers consciously and unconsciously manipulate data, every consumer should learn how to evaluate statistical claims.

2.) Avoid formula and generic words. Search for concrete subjects and active verbs, revising as many “to be” verbs as possible. A few suggestions below show how specific word choice sharpens and clarifies your meaning.

“Society is . . .” [who is this society and what exactly are they doing?]

n men and women will learn how to..., writers can generate..., television addicts may chip away at..., American educators must decide..., taxpayers and legislators alike can help fix...

“the media”

n the new breed of television reporters, advertisers, hard hitting print journalists, horror flicks, TV movies of the week, sitcoms, national public radio, Top 40

“is, are, was, to be”

“to do, to make”

n any great action verb you can concoct: to generate, to demolish, to batter, to revolt, to discover, to flip, to signify, to endure

3.) Use your own words in thesis statements, avoiding quotation. Crafting an original, insightful, and memorable thesis makes a distinct impression on a reader. You will lose credibility as a writer if you become only a mouthpiece or a copyist; you will gain credibility by grabbing the reader with your own ideas and words.

A well-crafted thesis statement reflects well-crafted ideas. It signals a writer who has intelligence, commitment, and enthusiasm.